

THEORY OF ORNAMENTATION IN
GOTHIC ARCHITECTURE.

SCULPTURED decoration in architecture is one of the most important elements which we possess for giving character, richness, and variety to our designs; but the principles which have regulated its use among those nations in which architecture has been studied as an art, have not been so fully investigated as the subject deserves. This appears to me especially to be the case as regards ornamentation in Gothic architecture; for though we have had elaborate treatises on the forms of mouldings and the differences which may be traced therein at the successive periods of the style, still the knowledge thereby obtained partakes so much of mere antiquarianism, as to leave a void in the minds of those who seek to ascertain the theory of an art which produced such a peculiarity, and, to a certain extent, such an uniformity of style, as, though it may be divided into five or seven periods, it may still be classed and known as a whole as Gothic architecture. The mere investigation of the dates at which the variation in form of tracery and moulding occurred, though eminently useful in fixing the recollection of forms prevalent at certain periods, and providing thereby a safeguard for the exact imitation of the style which predominated at such periods, will not supply this theory. We must look for it in the architecture itself by a careful discrimination of the differences which exist between it and the styles and practice of other national architecture. Some of these differences, which are broad and patent, have been noticed by the earliest writers on the subject.

The evident characteristic of its being an arcuated style of architecture contrasted with classic columnar and trabeated; the invariable adoption of pointed arches in preference to semicircular; the tendency to obtain effect by height and by pyramidal forms, instead of rectangular horizontal ones; are all principles which have been ably developed in the various treatises on the art. Rickman, in his well-known work, was one of the first who pointed out some of these differences, which give the marked character of Gothic architecture in distinction and contrast with the Greek and Roman. He alludes to the horizontal character of the cornice in the latter as opposed to the prevalence of vertical lines of mouldings in the former. He points out the manner in which the mouldings in classic architecture project from the face of a building, while in the Gothic (with the exception of dripstones) they recede from it, or, as Brandon expresses it, are sunk from the face of the work. He adduces also other contrasts, and elucidates in this manner certain differences which may be considered as principles of design. There is, however, another branch of study which tends to give essential character to all architecture, not only to Gothic, but to that of all nations, which has not received in this style that attention and study as regards principles which it assuredly deserves,—I mean the system of ornamentation by sculptured decoration.

The subject, therefore, to which I wish to call attention is the manner in which the Gothic architects, from the period of the Early Pointed Architecture to the time of the Renaissance, used their mouldings, and composed their ornamentation; and if we find that their use of these materials, which are common to all architecture, is essentially different, not only from the classic, but also from the architecture of the Indians, Egyptians, or Moors; that such use prevailed during the various periods which have been distinguished as forming one combined style, under the name of Gothic, and that it gives a marked peculiarity of design to the architecture itself, we may fairly presume that it was a principle which the Gothic architects or freemasons laid down as a sure guide in all their designs. The principle to which I allude, is the careful avoidance of disturbing the surface contour of their mouldings by sculptured carving; or, in other words, ornamented or carved mouldings, known as such in classic architecture, were never used.

Modern English architects, who, thanks to the careful investigations of antiquaries and non-professional writers, are excellent copyists,

and can carefully follow and work out the details which have been elaborately supplied them by numerous valuable publications on the art, have adopted the system; but it is singular that no writer on Gothic architecture has alluded to the peculiarity, and, I assert, principle, on this matter of ornamentation. Poley, in his very useful manual of Gothic mouldings, makes some valuable remarks on their variety and effect as mouldings, but alludes but slightly to the use of sculpture. "Gothic architecture," he says, "revelled in the use of mouldings: we are not speaking of what are usually called ornamental mouldings, such as dog's-tooth, the ballflower, &c., so much as of the plain, continuous lines of light and shadow, though they are in effect identical, since the former are nothing but serrated ridges, more or less rounded and modified from the first process." Brandon adopts the same view, pointing out how the dog's-tooth ornament was sunk out of the block. Colling, in his work on Gothic ornaments, does not allude to any system, but illustrates, by drawings, the facts which he has collected, and which all show the principle which I believe guided their design. Their mouldings were not carved or sculptured: the effect was produced by superadded ornamentation.

The difference is, perhaps, more evident to an architect who has been occupied in design in both species of architecture, than to him who has confined his study to the Gothic alone. In the classic style, if he wishes to obtain richness by ornamentation and decoration, he seizes at once, according to the examples of the Greeks and Romans, on the mouldings themselves, and obtains his effect by fretting and cutting up their surface contours: thus, the egg-and-tongue, the water-leaf, the honey-suckle, the raffle, the dentil, are all obtained by sinking down the surface of the moulding, and relieving the lines of the ornament, illustrating the remark of Ruskin, "that the Greek workmen cared for shadow only as a dark field wherefrom his light figure or design might be intelligibly detached." This system was pursued until every member of the cornice was sculptured and decorated, as may be observed in the ruins of Spalatro, and those of Palmyra and Baalbec; and not only in classic, but, in fact, to whatever architecture we look, we find that this system prevailed. In the Egyptian we may observe that the mouldings were always used as the first and chief points of sculptured decoration, as the cable mouldings at the angles of their temples, the large cavetto of their crowning cornice, and the numerous carved mouldings on their columns and panelings amply testify: such also was the practice of the Indians and Moors.

The absence of this means of enrichment in Gothic architecture may appear at first incredible to a person rich in recollection of the highly decorated effect which a Gothic edifice produces upon his imagination; and the glorious host of exquisite devices in foliage which seem to live and wave over its surface would seem to refute me; but a careful and extensive examination of the style has convinced me that such is not only the fact, but that it was a principle which their architects laid down, that their system of mouldings, beautiful and perfect for obtaining light and shadow under every aspect, should never be further frittered up by indentation and carving. Where further richness was to be given, they gave it by superadding ornamentation and sculpture, without destroying the forms of the mouldings. The effect is the same as that produced by the statue of the veiled vestal in the Great Exhibition, where the marble veil adds grace to the figure, without concealing the features beneath it.

Look, for instance, at the first indication of decoration in the Early Pointed style. Amidst a deeply-massed group you observe one running up and down the arch filled with that peculiar ornament called the dog's-tooth, or, at a later period, another with a series of ball flowers, or another with a richly-carved emboss of crisp and trailing foliage, imitated from nature itself. Are not these, some will say, carved mouldings? Certainly not: compare them with the Greek and Roman, and other examples previously alluded to, and the essen-

tial difference is at once perceived. In Gothic the form of the moulding is preserved beneath the ornament, and the ornament itself is superadded of a totally different contour: the sculpture might be removed, as it now is, in some places by heroe or time, and the form of the moulding still appears perfect. Destroy the carving in a classic entablature, and an unmeaning lump is the result. It was from the desire of the architect to maintain this principle of preserving the contour of his mouldings that the system of deep undercutting and perforating their foliage arose. Instead of carving their mouldings, they threw a light and elegant decoration over them. Even in the capitals of their columns the same principle is perceptible, as in almost every instance the true bell-shaped form of the cap can be traced under the foliage, strongly corroborating the idea that the origin of this ornamentation was taken from nature, and arose from imitating the effect produced by tying leaves and branches round the capitals as even now we are in the habit of doing in our churches at the festival of Christmas. It is probable that the peculiar crocket ornament also arose from a similar imitation, as the dried forest leaves of the oak and chestnut often present a *fac-simile* of the sculptured representation.

If we examine further where the Gothic architects placed their other points of ornamentation, and observe how different they are from all preceding and succeeding systems, the truth of this theory will appear still more evident. They relied in the powers of geometry to give varied outline in their tracery and to produce forms which have almost the grace of sculpture, while the contour of their tracery mouldings is plain and untouched; but when they required sculptured ornament they placed it at the points of their cusps, terminating them in leaves or enriching their tracered vaults by sculptured bosses at the intersections of the ribs. They carved crockets, finials, brackets, and spandrels, but never the mouldings enclosing them: they hung leaves round their capitals in graceful twisted foliage, but still preserved the idea of their original forms of moulding.

That this was a principle peculiar to the Gothic architects may be further proved by examining the style of ornamentation in the preceding and succeeding periods. In the Norman and Transition styles the mouldings themselves are constantly found sculptured and carved: it is needless to refer to the cable moulding, the billeted, the chevron, and numerous others; and if we look to the decline of Gothic architecture we shall find that one of the first symptoms of its debasement is by its obtaining a classic taint by the introduction of carving on the mouldings, as may be observed in the oriel windows of Hengrave Hall, and other examples of a similar date. How was it that during a period of nearly 400 years this system was so entirely set aside that no instance can be produced of the slightest approach to the classic system, unless it was the result of a principle laid down and acted upon by the freemasons? Even when they sought richness of effect by painted decoration, the general usage was to colour the mouldings, or, if decorated, the paintings upon them did not follow or indicate the contour, but were distinct in pattern.

The difficulty of foregoing or avoiding the classic system of ornamentation, and the merit therefore of adopting this peculiarity by the Gothic architects, may be more fully appreciated by examining the works of other nations, where a recollection of the classical style has always lingered. Thus, in Italy, the Gothic architecture, associated with the Byzantine and Lombardian styles, constantly presents this feature of carving on the mouldings, and which gives to an artist accustomed to the English school a vague feeling of dissatisfaction, notwithstanding its pointed arches, tracered windows, and groined vaultings. It is this also which, in the modern productions of the French and German schools, produces upon us a similar harshness and revulsion of feeling, and shows at once that they have not appreciated the true principle of Gothic architecture. They